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ABSTRACT

This paper recounts the personal experiences of a bisexual high school teacher and a mother when she participated, with her students and her colleagues, in a camp organized by the National Council for Community and Justice and designed to make participants examine their ideas about homosexuality. The paper reports on the teacher's unsuccessful efforts to start a support group for gay, lesbian, bisexual, and questioning students on her high school campus. The teacher and other interested individuals put together a diversity workshop during a professional growth day, and, as a result the support group became a reality, the Gay/Straight Alliance was born. The paper concludes by describing some of the Alliance's activities at the high school. (BT)

Diversity and Learning: Ending the Silence – Starting a Gay/Straight Alliance

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Ending the Silence – Starting a Gay/Straight Alliance

I have come to the conclusion that silence can be deafening. That is why I have an "Agenda." My "Agenda" is that I want all children, all people, to be safe and honored for who they are, in school and in the world. It was easier to advocate for gay and lesbian equality when I was acting like a heterosexual. Now some people think I'm just "out" to help myself. And maybe I am, as well as the thousands of others who feel oppressed in school. I am an openly bisexual high school teacher and a mother in a committed relationship with a wonderful woman. It has been a rocky journey to attain some social justice, and we have miles to go.

A revolution came to our suburban upper-middle class high school in August of 1999. Four years earlier, I had finally met my soul mate and life partner. I was not "in the closet" about this but was not shouting from the rooftops about our relationship either, at least not to my students. A group from the National Council for Community and Justice (NCCJ) took 80 students and 20 staff members from Rancho Bernardo High School up to a camp in the mountains for three and a half days. It was called "Minitown." We went through many experiential activities that resulted in lots of dialogue about how people feel "other." Feeling "other" makes someone feel less powerful and therefore, unable to live up to his or her highest potential. Sometimes this feeling is so disempowering that the person withdraws from life in a variety of ways: failing grades, thoughts of suicide, depression, acting violent. Mini Town was filled with days of gut-wrenching emotion followed by tears of realization and empathy.

In one experience the facilitators put on music, played several songs, and asked us to listen. I knew immediately that all the artists were gay or lesbian, but I realized most of the students had no idea. A poem was then read about acceptance with an activity called "Cross the

Line" following. In this activity everyone is asked to line up in the middle of the room. There is a sign that says, "True" on one wall, and "False" on the other. Then we heard a series of statements ranging from fairly benign to high risk. A few examples:

"I have been taught that homosexuality is wrong."

"If I ever see a homosexual I would physically attack him/her."

"If I found out I had a teacher who was homosexual, I would transfer out of his or her class."

Each of us had to decide whether these statements were true or false, and then we were to move toward the corresponding sign. Since our decisions were highly visible, discovering what people really think was eye opening! When I saw two students who had been in my classes for years and who I had a relationship with like daughters, move to the side marked "True" on the last question, I had a hard time holding back tears. After the activity we were asked to come back and sit down and discuss what we felt. One of the two girls lay down with her head in my lap and asked me to stroke her hair (not unusual, I'd done it before like any mom would). She had no idea. As the students talked about the gay and lesbian community, a knot began to develop in my stomach. The kids were intellectualizing everything. As the knot grew bigger and I got sicker, I knew I had two choices: to throw up or to speak out. I am not a big fan of vomiting so I raised my hand, extracted the girl from my lap and made my way up to the front stage to address the 120 people in the audience, including NCCJ staff. All I remember saying was "This is what gay looks like" pointing to myself. Then the tears flowed freely, not just mine but also most of the audience. I spoke about how much it hurt to see some of my favorite people on this planet reject me only minutes earlier; I spoke about how afraid I was for my own two children, and afraid of how they would treat my daughter when she began attending this high school in a

month. I spoke of my own fears for when I returned to school. What would the rumor mill make of all this? I spoke of my wonderful partner, of finding a soul mate. I spoke of the night before when all of the girls in my cabin (over 60!) wanted me to tuck them in and kiss them goodnight on the forehead. Would I lose that privilege--to play surrogate mom tonight? I spoke of fears, anger, hurt and sadness. When I finished, most of the kids were crying and approaching the stage to give me supportive hugs. Football players told me that when we get back if anyone "messes" with me to just let them know. They said, "I got your back, Brick". Many kids were crying hysterically and ran out of the room. One boy was rocking in a fetal position. It turns out he just needed my forgiveness for thinking and saying violent things about homosexuals. He had never put a real face on it. The two girls told me how much they loved me and my revelation would never change how they felt about me. Additionally, they asked if I could forgive them. All in all, it was a life changing moment for me, for our school, for all people connected with RBHS.

The journey to transform Rancho Bernardo High School began with a question. Heather, a girl sitting in the back, quietly sobbing through all this, approached me later and told me she was gay. She asked if I would consider running a support group for gay, lesbian, bisexual, and questioning students on our campus. I said, "Yes!" I am a trained support group facilitator and have been running other types of groups for eight years. It was the first I heard that we had gay and lesbian kids at RBHS. We came down the mountain a few days later as inspired individuals, bonded forever as a group. We would change the world. We would start with RBHS!

Carole, an amazing straight advocate and Minitown camper, organizes the support groups for our campus. Word of mouth travels fast and soon she had interviewed over 15 kids who wanted to join the gay/lesbian/bisexual/transgender support group. We were all set to start on

the same day as the other groups (six total) when I was called into the principal's office. Many ignorant and fearful things were spoken in that meeting which resulted in my literally running out of the office. I vowed to never again enter a meeting with them by myself. Ironically, it all started as a concerned monologue about safety:

"If these kids all go into the same room at the same time, they'll be targeted and may be attacked when they come out of the room."

"We are not sure you are the right person to be running this group."

"We don't want to promote physical or emotional abuse and drive a wedge between students and parents."

"We have been in-serviced and told that kids shouldn't come out in high school. If they want to do that, there's a gay high school in Los Angeles they could go to"

I was stunned, silenced, and afraid. In disbelief, I could hardly speak or respond. I do remember saying that these kids are not safe when they come out of *any* room. Additionally, I asked what are we doing about the kids who don't make it safe? And how can we change the actions of the oppressors not the oppressed?

Our support group was halted before it ever began.

A group of kids from the list came to see me and asked if they could still meet in my room during lunch. We did . . . with the door locked and the blinds drawn. Silenced, ashamed, and invisible once again.

As luck would have it, it was my year to be evaluated. Having taught for nearly 20 years, I was eligible for an alternative evaluation. This type of evaluation allows teachers to construct and implement a project that possesses meaning for the individual teacher. After asking my evaluator about the possibilities for my project, I decided to create a faculty Gay/Straight

Alliance (GSA). A month later the faculty GSA was born with 40 members both gay and straight. We met at lunch and after school to talk about how we could promote acceptance of all students and how to combat the constant gay slurs we hear around campus and in our classrooms. We also talked about the blatant heterosexism (the assumption that everyone is straight) that we are barraged with in high school. Armed with ideas, knowledge, and the power in numbers, we set out to change our classrooms and the school's climate.

Things were going well. We were making progress. We felt a shift because of like minds talking and learning. A colleague, Tom Oliver, suggested a diversity workshop during a professional growth day. As a member of the faculty GSA, Tom asked for input from our group. We orchestrated an activity similar to the one at Minitown called "Cross the Line" to include all diversities. Then, later in the day we arranged guest speakers to address the 150 faculty members. We heard from a gay student athlete who had graduated the year before, a current gay student from a neighboring high school, a mother of one of our lesbian students, a straight student with a gay dad, and a lesbian mom with a 9th grade daughter. They all spoke eloquently to a captivated audience. The lesbian mom asked the teachers, "What are you doing to honor *my* family?" Most of the audience had not even considered parents of their students to be gay. Most people left with some new ideas to contemplate. I believe the day broke the silence and educated people causing a climate of acceptance to germinate.

Shortly after the diversity workshop our previously defunct support group became a reality. Carole set up the group again and this time didn't inform the administration. We met during class time for one hour once a week with a substitute covering my classes. At times the group grew to 18 people. The make-up of the group consisted of gay, lesbian, bisexual, children of gays, and questioning students. We were talking and kids were finding out that they were not

alone and there was nothing "wrong" with them (we probably saved their parents thousands of dollars in therapist fees).

A month later the student Gay/Straight Alliance was born. A straight student, Brianna, jumped through all the ASB hoops to begin the club. There were roadblocks. Our ASB advisor was skeptical. Luckily we have a new bill from the senate in California that allows gay/straight alliances equal access with that of other clubs. The law was on our side. The powers that be still brought up the issue of safety (they love to hide behind that one) as a reason for us not to meet. We were not allowed to advertise in the school bulletin like the other clubs. Our name could not be written out, only the initials GSA were allowed to be printed. Silenced again, always the shame around the word "Gay".

The first meeting took place in my classroom. I was nervous having been called on the "safety" issue again. I invited my faculty GSA to be present. I figured the more adults, the safer it would be for the students. The bell rang for lunch. They came . . . and came . . . 45 students and 23 teachers! We hardly fit in my classroom. The energy of social justice was alive and well that day. As a voice asked the teachers to stand, another teacher said, "We are here for you, we support you and what you're doing," and "You can tell us whenever you feel threatened or harassed." One boy who was gay and "out," was sitting in the back. Tears welled up in my eyes when he leaned over and said, "Are all these people here to support ME?" I replied with an emphatic, "YES!" The look of joyous surprise on his face was worth all the hassles and fights to get this far. Once again the precious feeling of inclusion that breeds empowerment and that those in power take for granted, was ours for that lunch period.

Two months later, in May, our club participated in the school's annual Multicultural Faire. With an adjusted bell schedule giving the students an hour for lunch, this was our moment

to go public; to come out to the whole school that gays and lesbians exist at RBHS and that we have many straight allies. We fought more battles to be allowed to have a booth at the faire. Once again the ASB advisor didn't think we constituted a "culture." I just asked a lot of questions for him to define culture for me. He finally relented and accepted our application for a booth even though that meant more phone calls for him to answer from conservative parents in our community. And of course the issue of safety was once again brought up!

It was an event! They placed our booth right in the middle of the quad with the rest of the booths surrounding ours. This was their definition of keeping us safe but acted to make our booth the center of it all! We had rainbow posters, big equal signs (courtesy of the Human Rights Campaign), stickers to hand out and put on 1000 backpacks, another 1000 stickers for clothing and skin, rainbow bracelets and "Human Pride" T-shirts for sale. PFLAG adults (parents and friends of lesbians and gays) showed up and handed out literature with us. One freshman, a lesbian, wrote an essay about what it is like being gay at our school. She ran off copies on her own and handed these out. Club members showed up in mass handing out advertisements about our meetings, chanting and working the crowds. People were curious about our club and mostly supportive. It turned into a celebration with pictures and lots of hugs and laughter. This hour was a highlight in my teaching career and it didn't even take place in a classroom.

By the following September our GSA meetings grew to 85 students. We had to find a new room. We moved out of my classroom and into the school's multipurpose room. This year, we are no longer the new kids on the block. We have participated in the AIDS walk, given after school seminars on homophobia and AIDS prevention, and raised money selling T-shirts to give a scholarship to a senior member of the club this June. We even get to advertise in the school

bulletin as the GAY/STRAIGHT ALLIANCE (no more initials of silence for us!) In January 2001 planning got underway for the DAY OF SILENCE project. Ten committed students from the club - some gay, some questioning, and some straight - have been meeting more than once a week to put this day together. They have made buttons (hundreds that declare, "Ask me why I'm silent"), cut out cards (4, 000 of them - enough for everyone at our school). They met with the principal and ASB advisor many times, held meetings for participants, wrote letters to the faculty, and more.

Tomorrow, April 3, 2001 is the Day of Silence at Rancho Bernardo High School. Over 200 students will be participating to call attention to the "Silence" of shame that gay students endure daily. I too shall be silent on this day. I hope people hear what I'm *not* saying. I hope they can't imagine a world where gay and lesbian people are silent. I hope they want to hear my whole voice, my authentic self when it is over. I hope that someday when kids use the phrase, "That's so gay," it will mean something cool. I hope that phrase is never used to drive a child to thoughts of suicide or to go on a shooting spree. I hope the silence encourages people to speak out for social justice everywhere and for everyone.

The barriers for doing anything to promote equality for gay and lesbian students are still as strong as ever. Conservative parents, a homophobic administration, and a general ignorance still prevail. But everyday we make strides to educate more and more students. I sense the feeling among the young people to be one of acceptance.

Can you hear the silence?